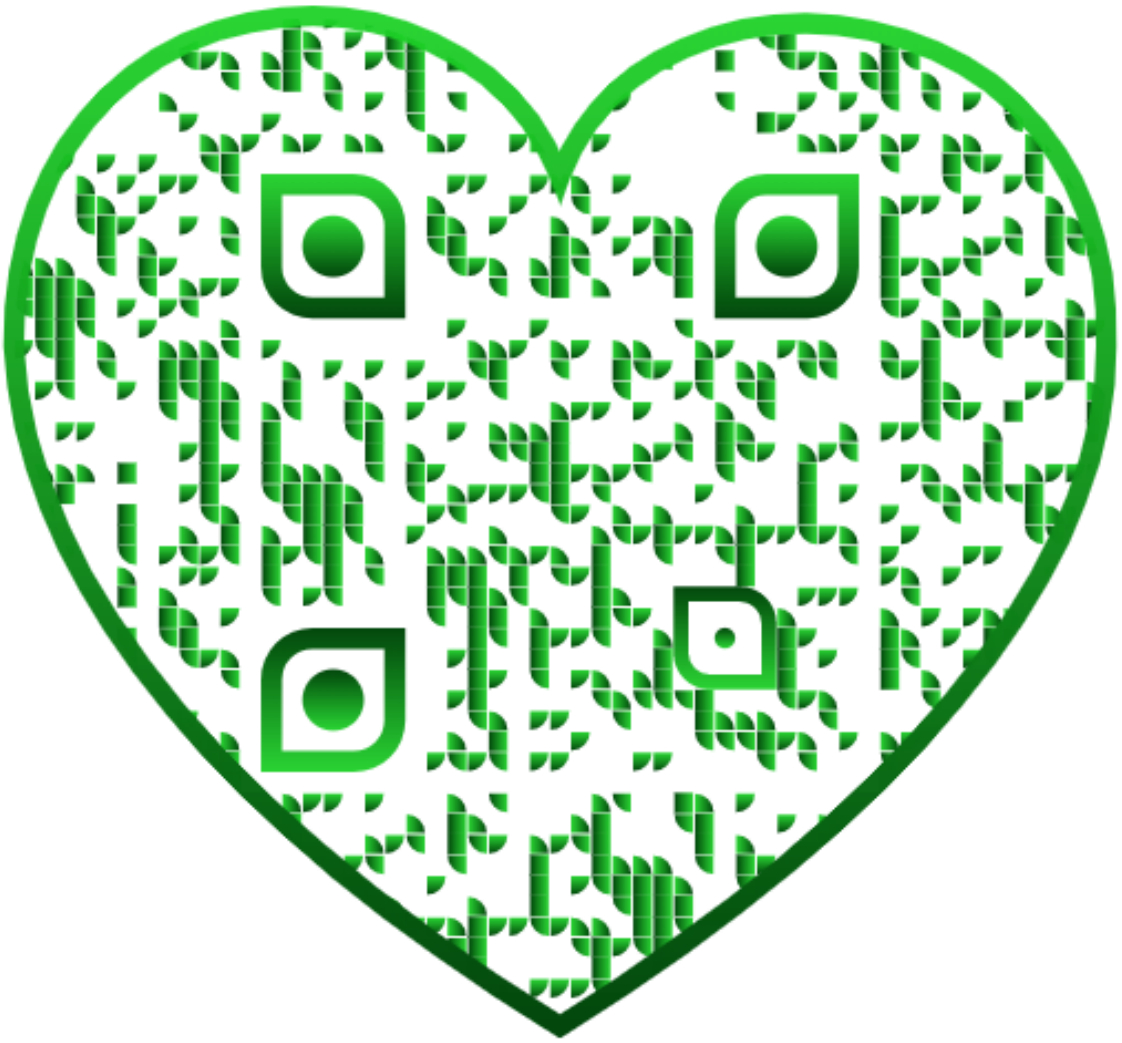
# KNOCK ON WOOD

## A LESSON IN CLASSIC MEMPHIS SOUL

It's one of life's great pleasures: You sink deep into a pulsing groove, find a harmonic space to fill, and become one with the bass and drums. While other styles offer opportunities to surrender to the beat, in Memphis soul that's *all* that matters. In this lesson, we'll dissect some classic soul grooves to see what makes them tick, and then try to grab some of that cosmic woo-woo for ourselves. ■ Of course, it's impossible to discuss soul guitar without acknowledging Steve Cropper. He has played on hundreds of records and crafted the hooks for dozens of soul's biggest hits. His style *defines* the genre. While this lesson isn't about Cropper per se, his ideas are embodied in many of these examples. (For a private lesson with Cropper, see "Soul, Man," in the July '94 *GP*. ■ Before we start: Most

BY ANDY ELLIS



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soul hits were originally recorded in "horn" keys, such as *A♭*, *E♭*, and *B♭*. For convenience, I've notated many of these grooves in the guitar-centric keys of *A*, *E*, *C*, and *G*. Once you've mastered an example, do the right thing and practice it in flat keys, too. The next time you share the stage with horn players, you'll be glad you did the extra prep work.

## CHOP AND CHURN

The essence of soul guitar lies in great rhythm parts, which often call for abbreviated versions of dominant 7s, rather than full barre chords. **Ex. 1** features two soul-approved grips on the second, third, and fourth strings. These three-note *A7* and *D7* voicings can sound like a horn section—especially when you observe the staccato markings and toss in a few half-step slides. In this groove, the slides connect beats two and three, but for variety, try sliding into beat one. Wrap your fretting-hand thumb around the fretboard to mute the bottom strings (see "Thumb Thang" on p. 75 for details), and listen to Sam & Dave's "Hold on, I'm Comin'" for inspiration. Use a clean, present tone, watch the picking indications, and keep those eighth-note chops nice and crisp by bouncing off the frets immediately after you whack a chord.

Barres come in handy when you want to pound all six strings, as in **Ex. 2a**, for the kind of churning groove that drives "Tramp" by Otis Redding and Carla Thomas. Notice how you're switching between two elements—the horn-like, chordal stabs (beat one and the first half of beat two) and the insistent, offbeat roots (beats two, three, and four). Such call-and-response is an important ingredient in the soul stew. To play the muted *C7* chords in beats three and four, simply relax your barre and strike the deadened, inside strings.

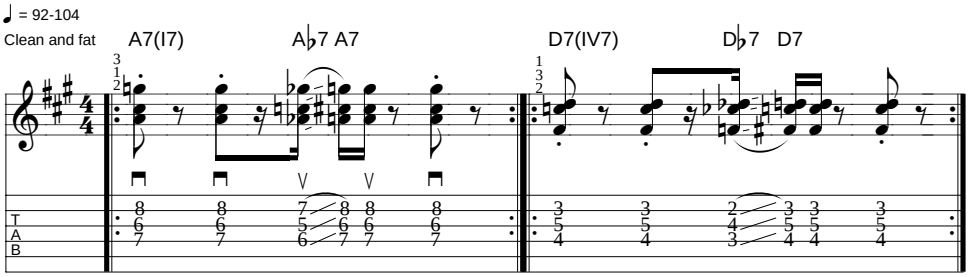
**Ex. 2b** shows a variation of this classic, dah-da-*dahp* soul rhythm. Featuring slinky low-string riffing, this version shines at slightly slower tempos. The *C7* grip in beats one and two is another essential three-note voicing. Now we've got three abbreviated dominant 7s to practice up and down the fretboard. Just keep track of the root, and you can use these forms in any position. Here's the key:

- Ex. 1's *A7* has its root on the fourth string.
- Ex. 1's *D7* has its root on the second string.
- Ex. 2b's *C7* has its root on the fifth string.

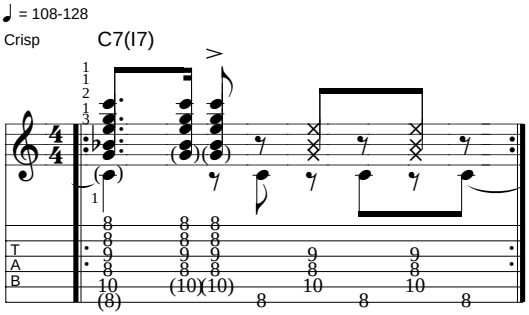
## MAKE IT SWAMPY

Unlike Motown soul guitarists who played refined, precise, interlocking parts, Memphis and Muscle Shoals pickers often favored swampy sounds. Listen to Aretha Franklin's "Chain of Fools," and you'll hear tremolo-laden riffing mixed with backbeat chording. For a taste of this loose, sweet, and dirty vibe, try **Ex. 3a**. Let the *C7* arpeggio tones melt together (this sounds killer with tremolo or Uni-Vibe), then release your grip just enough to mute the *chink* on beat two. The quarter-bend adds a bluesy touch

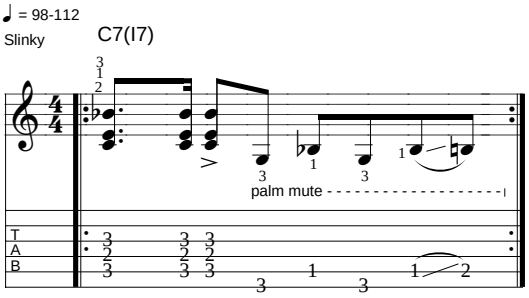
**Ex. 1**



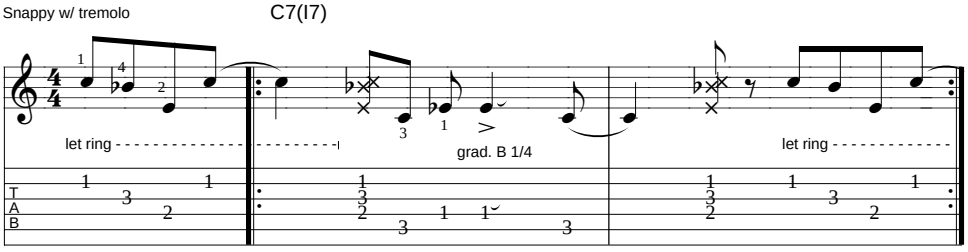

**Ex. 2a**




**Ex. 2b**




**Ex. 3a**



to the low-string riff. Try a hybrid pick-and-fingers attack on the ringing *C7* arpeggio.

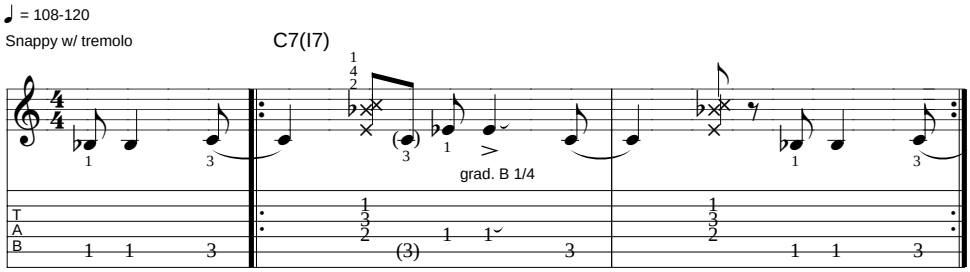
**Ex. 3b** puts another spin on our swampy line. With even more low-string riffing and only a muted *C7* for harmony, this passage has a leaner, meaner feel. Snap both examples together and alternate between them.

## CHAIN OF THIRDS

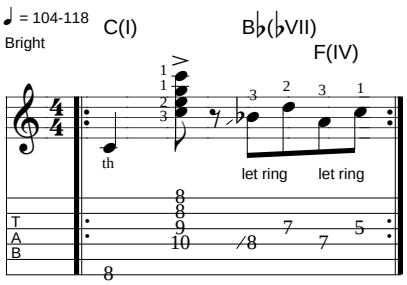
Classic soul guitar incorporates both chords and lines—the words "lead" and "rhythm" aren't part of the vernacular. Inspired by the Bar-Kays' "Soul Finger," **Ex. 4a** shows how to handle both chores gracefully. Use your thumb to fret the root on the sixth string, and let the thirds (beats three and four) ring as indicated. Notice how these melodic intervals capture the essence of *B♭* and *F* using only two notes per chord. We're playing the root and 3 of *B♭*, and the 3 and 5 of *F*.

The guitar part to Otis Redding's "Pain in My Heart" also features thirds, but this time, they're played harmonically (both notes are sounded together). As you

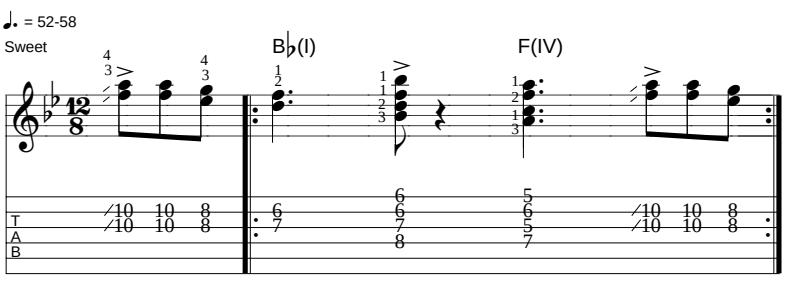
**Ex. 3b**



**Ex. 4a**




**Ex. 4b**



pluck **Ex. 4b**, hear how the thirds connect *F* to *B♭*. The first interval (*F*-*A*) is the root and 3 of *F*, and the last interval (*D*-*F*) is the 3 and 5 of *B♭*, so our chain of thirds starts and ends with chord tones.

## MAGIC SIXTHS

When you invert a third—move its top note down an octave, or conversely, raise its bottom note up an octave—you create a sixth. Nothing says Memphis soul more distinctly than a series of chords linked by moving sixths. It's *the* sound. Along with Sam & Dave's immortal "Soul Man," many Otis Redding classics feature sixths, including "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," "The Happy Song," "Pain in My Heart," "That's How Strong My Love Is," and "I've Been Loving You Too Long." Sixths offer a slick way to outline chords while leaving space for vocals and horns.

**Ex. 5** shows how to enhance four-note major voicings with

# THUMB THANG

Though traditional jazz and classical guitarists admonish students to "keep your thumb *behind* the neck," seasoned soul and R&B players aren't afraid to wrap their fretting-hand thumbs over the edge of the fretboard.

For example, when strumming three-note voicings on the inside strings, you can mute the two bottom strings with your thumb and the top string with your 1st finger. **Fig. 1** shows a soul-approved sixth-position *A7* (root-3-♭7), and **Fig. 2** shows a third-position *D7* (3-♭7-root). These compact voicings get the musical point across without hogging sonic space, and if you mute carefully, you can strum them as hard as a full-on barre chord.

Your thumb can also *fret* the sixth string, as in **Fig. 3**. Here, this root-♭7-3 voicing is shown as a third-position *G7*. **Fig. 4** shows a classic R&B fingering for a major chord (root, octave, 3, 5). In this instance, it's an eighth-position *C*. Your thumb does double duty in both these voicings: While fretting the root on the sixth string, it mutes the fifth string. —AE

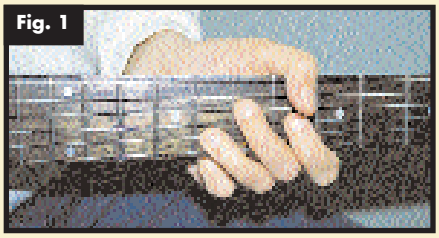


Fig. 1

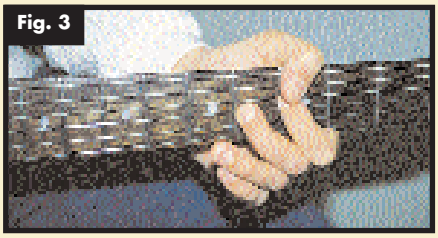


Fig. 3

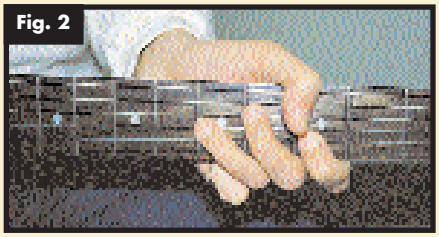


Fig. 2

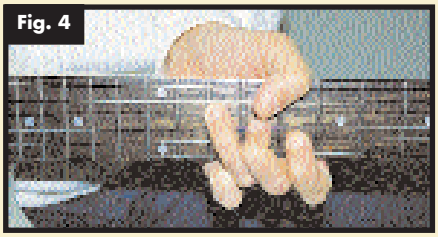
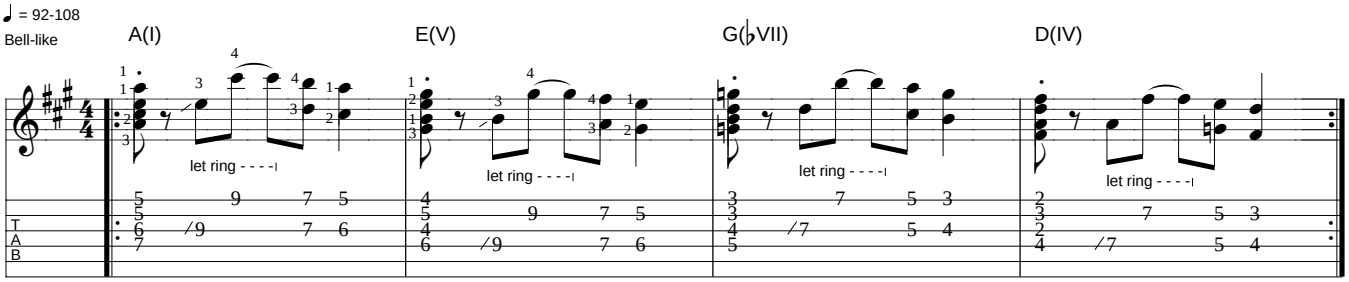
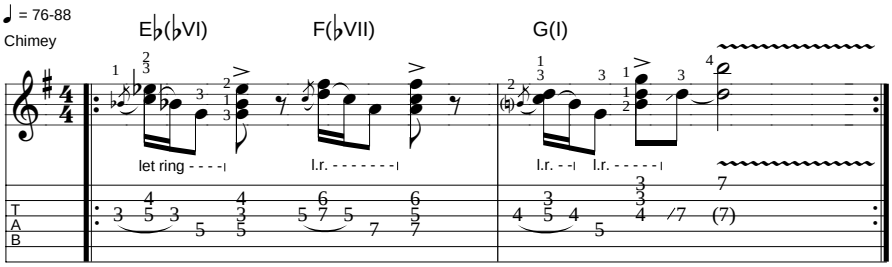


Fig. 4

**Ex. 5**




**Ex. 6**

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**"I'VE BEEN A METRONOME ALL MY LIFE. IF YOU SET THE GROOVE, IT *AIN'T* GOING TO GO NOWHERE."**

**STEVE CROPPER**

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moving sixths. In bars 3 and 4, the sixths occur on the first and third strings, while in bars two and four, the sixths occupy the second and fourth strings. You'll need to master both sets to play fluid soul guitar. Fortunately, the shapes are identical on either group of strings, and in each case, the root is fretted with your 1st finger.

## FILLS AND FILIGREE

Distilled from parts Reggie Young played on Dusty Springfield's "Willie & Laura Mae Jones," **Ex. 6** reveals two important embellishments. (Early country and bluegrass musicians played similar fills on acoustic guitar, banjo, mandolin, and fiddle, but it was Curtis Mayfield who brought these moves to electric guitar and made them R&B staples.)

In bar 1, we use a quick hammer and pull to outline first *E♭* and then *F*. For either chord, the action swirls around a 5-6-5 move. In bar 2, we embellish *G* with a 3-4-3 shift. This is potent stuff, so let's take a closer look.

This liquid chording is based on contracting and expanding intervals. Check it out: Within bar 1's *E♭*, we hammer from a fourth (*B♭-E♭*) to a minor third (*C-E♭*), and then pull off to the fourth again. Same deal within *F* (*C-F* moves to *D-F* and back). The intervals in bar 2 are different. Within *G*, we hammer from a minor third (*B-D*) to a major second (*C-D*) and back.

## DOUBLE THE BASS

As the house rhythm section for Stax—the premier '60s Memphis soul label and Atlantic Records affiliate—Booker T. & The MGs powered scores of soul hits. In the process, Steve Cropper and bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn devised several strategies for laying down a hulking groove. One patented approach was to double the bass line on guitar. The results? A squeaky tight, throbbing octave figure that wouldn't quit.

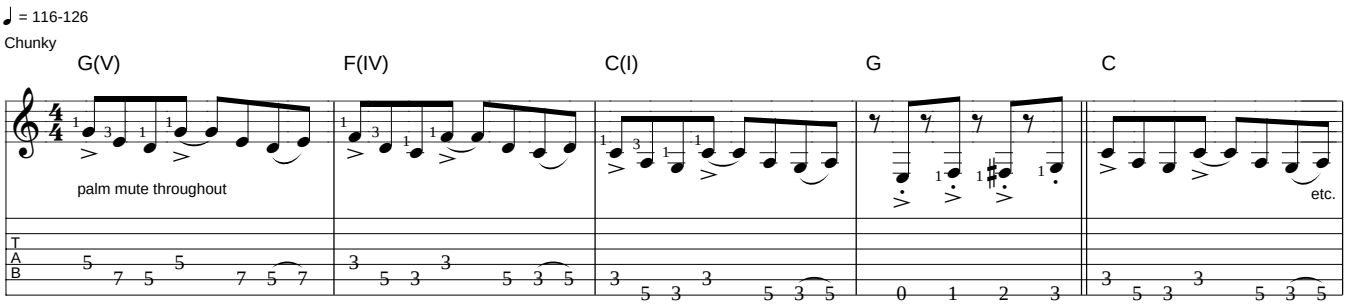
Listen to Otis Redding's "I Can't Turn You Loose," and then play **Ex. 7**, which illustrates the Cropper/Dunn doubling technique. Palm mute the strings for an authentic thunk, and watch the accents. You can hear Cropper and Dunn play similar lines in the MGs' "Green Onions" and "Time Is Tight." (You can learn the latter in the July '94 Cropper lesson.)

## THE FUNKY SIDE

**Ex. 8** is built around the funky, hammered dominant-7th move that propels many Memphis guitar parts. Distilled from the MGs' "Aw' Mercy," this four-bar figure reflects the influence of harder-edged Chicago blues. As in Examples 1 and 2b, we're reducing a dominant 7 to three notes. In this case, however, they are ♭7, 3, and 5 (low to high). Ahh—a rootless form. To give this grip its bluesy due, snap the ♭3-♮3 hammer-on. Though it's only a grace note, it's the star of the show. Use your pick, middle, and ring fingers on the fourth, third, and second strings, respectively, and yank the highest two so they spank the frets.

The last two beats in bar 3 contain a swift, gospel IV-I7 change—another essential move for your soul collection. Learn it up and down the fretboard, and you'll be ready to testify. Did you catch the thumb-fretted root in bar 4's *G7*? It's yet another soul-certified dominant-7th voicing for you to cherish.

**Ex. 7**




**Ex. 8**